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A Study of Physical Appearance and Level of Attraction to the Opposite Sex

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ABSTRACT

This experiment examined the effects of physical appearance on level of attraction between people of the opposite sex. Level of attraction was measured using a questionnaire that included a picture of an attractive or unattractive stimulus person. The participants consisted of 57 university undergraduate students. They viewed the stimulus person, and then answered questions based on their attraction to and on how willing they would be to participate in various activities with that person. The results of the Independent Samples Nonequivalent Control Groups Design indicated significance between level of attraction and physical appearance in mate selection; therefore, in this study, the implications of attractive external characteristics are discussed.

The activity of objectification, of gazing and being gazed at, is part of daily life for both men and women and may well be an essential component in the production of pleasure as we know it. Many studies have shown that physical characteristics function as important determinants of the impressions elicited from others (Husain & Firdous, 1990; Kowner & Ogawa, 1995; Lundy, Tan, & Cunningham, 1998; Singh & Young, 1995), and the importance of physical appearance as a factor in the formation of interpersonal relationships has been found to be significant (Kleck & Rubenstein, 1975). Several studies on physical appearance have shown that similarity in physical attractiveness (Folkes, 1982; Husain et al., 1990; Murstein, 1972) or a ranking of one's own physical attractiveness is related to the formation of relationships between couples (Kowner, 1995). The importance that physical appearance plays in nonverbal communication, as well as the influence that those characteristics have on the formation of interpersonal relationships have begun to be researched in depth.

One area of human interaction in which physical appearance seems to be an important factor is that of mate selection (Chambers, Christiansen, & Kunz, 1983). It has also been found to be a factor in predicting friendships (Johnson, 1989). Another explanation as to why physical appearance is important was investigated by Hinsz (1989), who considered the phenomenon of people tending to marry people who look like themselves. Finally, it is the first impression which either causes or fails to cause a prolonged interest by an observer (Lyman, Hatlelid, & Macurdy, 1981). Finally, studies have shown physical attractiveness to be consistently related to actual ratings of desirability (Hensley, 1992). Such studies as these supported

our assumption that physical characteristics are significantly important in determining the level of attraction to another person.

To further research the role of physical attractiveness in mate selection, our study was designed to replicate previous studies about physical appearance. In our study we considered how men and women reacted as a whole to physical characteristics in determining the choice of prospective romantic partners. We tested the actual level of attraction of respondents to desirable and undesirable stimulus persons, and did not differentiate between the attractiveness or gender of the participants.

In our experiment, college men and women's level of attraction as affected by physical appearance was assessed. Level of attraction was measured via a self-report of the degree of appeal generated by the physical appearance of the opposite sex. Physical appearance was defined as the outward aspects of the opposite sex, encompassing external features, hair-style, clothing, and implied financial status. We hypothesized that physical appearance would modify the degree of attraction between members of the opposite sex; specifically, the higher the degree of attractiveness, the higher the level of appeal between the two sexes.

METHOD

Participants

The participants consisted of fifty-seven students (19 men, 38 women) at a large midwestern university. Four PSY 290 classes were randomly selected, and the students enrolled in these classes served as subjects.

Since there were more women than men enrolled in the classes, our method of selection resulted in nearly twice as many female participants as male participants. The mean age was 21.82 (ranging from 18 to 36 years). The majority were Caucasian and of average undergraduate age. Approximately 4% were American Indian and 2% were Hispanic. All had previously taken a minimum of two psychology courses.

Instruments

A questionnaire was used to obtain information from the participants. The questionnaire, constructed specifically for this study, consisted of three pages; the first of which requested demographical information such as age, gender, current relationship status, and included questions pertaining to the seriousness of the participant's most recent relationship. The second of which contained 30 questions (see Appendix A) which asked the participants to rate the importance of various personal characteristics on a scale of 1 (least important) to 6 (most important). The third page contained the Attraction Scale, which included a picture of a stimulus person and 10 questions (see Appendix B), and asked the participants to indicate their feelings (from "elated" to "repulsed") about taking part in various activities with the stimulus person. The Attraction Scale is a self-report instrument designed specifically for this experiment. Although the validity or reliability of this instrument has not been determined, it was chosen for use in our study based on the questions relevant to this experiment, the amount of time it takes to complete, and the questions of interest to those in the particular age group of the participants. Four different pictures were used on the Attraction Scale; an unattractive woman and an unattractive man were given to the men and women in Group 1 respectively, and an attractive

woman and an attractive man were given to men and women in Group 2 respectively. The two groups were randomly determined via the four university classes used as participants. Group 1 consisted of the first two classes, and Group 2 consisted of the second two classes; subjects received the questionnaires with the unattractive and attractive stimulus person's pictures respectively. The validity of our unattractive and attractive stimulus persons was not predetermined. They were chosen based on the definition of attractive found in previous studies (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990; Mehrabian & Blum, 1997; Singh et al., 1995). Specifically, well-groomed females with slender figures, low waist-to-hip ratios, large breasts, and high-status clothing were selected to represent the attractive female for our study. Well-groomed muscular males with neotenous features of large eyes, prominent cheekbones, broader chins, and high-status clothing were selected to represent the attractive male. Persons lacking these characteristics or exhibiting completely opposite traits were selected to represent the unattractive stimulus persons. The pictures were found on greeting cards on which two persons were intended to represent the American ideal, and two persons were intended to be overtly repulsive. All stimulus persons appeared to be Caucasian and approximately the same age as the average age of the participants.

Procedure

The experimenter entered four undergraduate classes separately, a questionnaire was distributed to the participants (men and women were each given a questionnaire that included a picture of the opposite sex); participants were then told to read the directions and answer the questions based on personal opinion. The test was completely anonymous—names and other identification information were not requested. Total testing time took approximately 10 min. The questionnaires were collected by the experimenter, and the participants were debriefed. The experimenter scored the data using a reverse scoring technique on questions that had to do with characteristics other than physical appearance, in order to determine the emphasis the participant placed on physical appearance.

RESULTS

An Independent Samples Nonequivalent Control Groups Design was used to determine the relationship between physical appearance and level of attraction to a member of the opposite sex. The data from the questionnaire and that of the Attraction Scale were combined. These data were analyzed on SPSS. Those who received the picture of the unattractive target (Group 1; $M = 27.15$, $SD = 1.52$) were found to be less likely to select the stimulus person as a mate than those who received the picture of the attractive target (Group 2; $M = 40.50$, $SD = 1.87$), $t(55) = 5.58$, $p < .001$. Group 2 (the "attractive group") was 13.35% more willing to get involved with the stimulus person in a romantic way. This was found to be significant; therefore, in this experiment, physical appearance was found to be a factor in determining the level of attraction in a possible romantic relationship.

DISCUSSION

Although, in this study, physical appearance was found to significantly affect the level of attraction between people of the opposite sex, limitations that might have influenced the results of our study are racial preferences and sexual orientation. Some people might be attracted to a specific ethnicity. This could have influenced their level of attraction to the particular Caucasian stimulus persons used in our experiment. Sexual orientation might have been a factor because the participants were not questioned about their sexual preferences and the questionnaires were distributed assuming the participants were heterosexual. Other variables not controlled for included age (although the mean age was 21.82, we had respondents as young as 18 years and as old as 36 years), and relationship status. Those participants who were married or in a committed relationship might have been less likely to be attracted to the stimulus person due to the level of satisfaction in their current situation. In future research, it would be necessary to rate the level of satisfaction in the participants' current relationships and attempt to gather data from only single, heterosexual individuals. However, because

there were only 57 participants in this study, it was determined that no one should be excluded from the data—including those who were involved in relationships at the time of the experiment. In order to better control for racial preference, one might add this question to the demographical section of the questionnaire, and consider omitting data in which the participant's preference didn't match that of the stimulus person.

Another limitation which might have influenced our results is the participation of significantly more women than men in our experiment. Studies have been conducted to address gender differences in physical attraction (Nevid, 1984; Pines, 1998), and some have found that men emphasize physical attractiveness more than do women for serious relationships (Lundy et al., 1998). In order to better examine gender differences, future studies might use a more equal number of men and women participants and then analyze the men and women respondents independently.

One implication of this experiment is the value of training individuals to examine their own decision-making task to determine the impact of physical appearance in mate selection. Future studies might be conducted to determine the longevity and quality of relationships founded initially on physical attraction. If the results of future studies find relationships based on physical attraction to be unsatisfactory, individuals could be educated to make better informed decisions regarding mate selection (i. e., learning to place more emphasis on nonphysical characteristics and less on physical attraction). Training the general public might result in a higher level of satisfaction in a significant number of relationships. For example, a mandatory pre-marital counseling program could be initiated in which it might be determined whether a couple's attraction is based primarily on physical appearance, and the probability of the survival of the marriage could be discussed.

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APPENDIX A

Please circle the correct answer to the following set of questions. On a scale of 1 - 6 (where 1 is the least - and 6 is the greatest) - in considering the ideal "date" or partner, how important:

1. is a date/partner's eye color?
1 2 3 4 5 6
2. is it for a date/partner to have a good physique?
1 2 3 4 5 6
3. is it for a date/partner to have a sense of humor?
1 2 3 4 5 6
4. is it for a date/partner to be intelligent?
1 2 3 4 5 6
5. is it for a date/partner to be loyal?
1 2 3 4 5 6
6. is it for a date/partner to be kind and caring?
1 2 3 4 5 6
7. is it to have common interests with a date/partner?
1 2 3 4 5 6
8. is it for a date/partner to be a good lover?
1 2 3 4 5 6
9. is it for a date/partner to help with domestic chores?
1 2 3 4 5 6
10. is it for a date/partner to be communicative?
1 2 3 4 5 6
11. is a date/partner's hair color?
1 2 3 4 5 6
12. is a date/partner's sense of fashion?
1 2 3 4 5 6
13. is a date/partner's financial status?
1 2 3 4 5 6
14. are a date/partner's ambitions?
1 2 3 4 5 6
15. is a date/partner's complexion?
1 2 3 4 5 6

APPENDIX B

Based on the photograph you have been given, please circle the correct answer to the following set of questions where "repulsed" represents your most negative reaction and "elated" represents your most positive reaction.

16. is a date/partner's smile?

1 2 3 4 5 6

17. is a date/partner's weight?

1 2 3 4 5 6

18. is a date/partner's personality?

1 2 3 4 5 6

19. is a date/partner's physical fitness?

1 2 3 4 5 6

20. is it for a date/partner to have good hygiene?

1 2 3 4 5 6

21. is a date/partner's astrological sign?

1 2 3 4 5 6

22. is a date/partner's facial features (ie. nose size)?

1 2 3 4 5 6

23. is it for a date/partner to have nice teeth?

1 2 3 4 5 6

24. is it for a date/partner to be drug free?

1 2 3 4 5 6

25. is it for a date/partner to be generous?

1 2 3 4 5 6

26. is it for a date/partner to be spontaneous?

1 2 3 4 5 6

27. is it for a date/partner to have a nice chest/breasts?

1 2 3 4 5 6

28. is it if a date/partner wears glasses?

1 2 3 4 5 6

29. is it if a date/partner has freckles?

1 2 3 4 5 6

30. is it if a date/partner has a physical handicap?

1 2 3 4 5 6

1. How would you feel if this person sat next to you in class every day?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

2. How would you feel if this person tried to dance with you in a bar?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

3. How would you feel if this person asked for your phone number?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

4. How would you feel if this person asked you out on a date?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

5. How would you feel if this person invited you to his/her house for dinner?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

6. How would you feel if this person were waiting for you outside of your class?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

7. How would you feel if this person offered you an expensive gift for no special occasion?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

8. How would you feel about having sex with this person?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated

9. How would you feel about taking this person home to meet your family?

Repulsed Embarrassed Annoyed Pleased Excited Elated